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ABSTRACT

In a project designed to interpret research and development in the field of reading to practitioners, telephone interviews were conducted with a representative group of the nation's educators and with seven outstanding reading researchers by the Research and Development Interpretation Service. The practitioners were found to be interested primarily in processes involved in language and reading comprehension; they asked practical questions about improving comprehension abilities. The researchers indicated that much of the research on comprehension is exploratory and that only tentative findings are possible. (Lists of the questions asked are included.) (TS)

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INFORMATION NEEDS OF PRACTITIONERS IN READING READINESS

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CEMREL, Inc.
March, 1978

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INFORMATION NEEDS OF PRACTITIONERS IN READING READINESS

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Classroom teachers, reading specialists and school administrators are faced with many decisions concerning the delivery of instruction and the facilitation of learning in the field of reading on a daily basis. What to teach; in what order; how to teach it; what materials to use; what strategies work best with particular children; and how to assess student progress and teacher performance are typically the foci of practitioner concern. Practitioners use a variety of approaches and resources in their desire to reach decisions. However, much of day to day effort is based on the use of ad hoc, intuitive approaches, common sense and guidance from current curriculum adoptions. Teachers and administrators often complain that the results of research and development efforts are not practical or useful for them. At the same time, researchers and developers are concerned that the results of their work are not used in the schools. In an effort to strengthen the communication between researchers and practitioners and hopefully stimulate use of research outcomes to improve school practice, The National Institute of Education has contracted with CEMREL to conduct the Research and Development Interpretation Service Project (RDIS) as a part of the National Research and Development Exchange, a major, new initiative in educational dissemination. The Research and Development Interpretative service works to improve the effectiveness of communication between the research and development community and those who work in schools and other education agencies.

In brief, this effort involves the development of approaches to synthesize and interpret research and development findings and outcomes for school based audiences. The activity described here is part of the

effort of the RDIS project to interpret research and development outcomes in the field of reading. There have been many attempts to summarize research literature for teachers, administrators and parents that have first asked, "What have researchers discovered?" and then, "What are the implications of these discoveries for practitioners?" The RDIS project reversed the usual sequence. We began by interviewing teachers, supervisors and administrators to discuss the questions they wanted answered and then to review the literature in an effort to seek those answers. We selected a group of practitioners: classroom teachers, reading and curriculum specialists, and school administrators with whom we had been associated and whose work we respected. We did not use a systematic sampling technique to select a representative group of the nation's educators. We conducted telephone interviews based on a set of questions about reading and reading research. The purpose of the interview was to ask the practitioners to identify problems and questions about instruction in reading that research could address.

We can't be sure that the problems and questions that were raised are the questions we would have gotten had we asked a larger or a different group, but we found a high percentage of congruity between the concerns of the practitioners at the various levels in which they work within the schools.

Following are the questions that were asked:

1. What are the problems/issues/questions that you have concerning instruction in reading at the elementary level that you would ask researchers to address?

   a. Include those problems that you faced most recently.

b. Provide a brief description of the context in which the problem arose, i.e., grade level, age of students, working with other school professionals, problems presented by parents, etc.

2. What help do you expect reading research to provide on these problems/ issues?
   a. How do you find out about research on reading? (Publications, seminars, graduate courses, training workshops, etc.)
   b. What problems do you find with reading, understanding, and using research information?
3. Are there problems/issues that have been addressed by reading research with the resulting knowledge applied in classrooms?
4. What, if anything, do you expect to learn from research in the future?
5. On what issues in reading do you find the least help from the publications you typically read or review?
   a. What publications?

These rather lengthy interviews yielded 75 questions in ten categories of reading. We separated questions into categories that seem to encompass the sense and intent of the questions. The chart below summarizes the frequency of the questions asked in each category.

Reading Category	Number of Different Questions Asked Across 14 Interviews
Reading Readiness	6
Early Stages of Reading	9
Word Recognition	11
Language Development	9
Subskills of Reading	5

Comprehension	17
Curriculum Selection	4
Classroom Organization and Management	5
Motivation for Reading	4
Reading Disabilities/Learning Disabilities	5
TOTAL	75

While reading comprehension was the cateogry where the largest number of questions was raised, this summary will concentrate on the questions asked about reading readiness and the early stages of reading. Following are examples of questions that were asked in these categories.

---How beneficial is it for kindergarten children to learn the letters of the alphabet?

---How much emphasis should be placed on phonics instruction in the early stages of learning to read?

---Is reading readiness in pre-school or kindergarten a pre-requisite for most children entering first grade? Don't most of the schools require that 5 year olds have readiness activities before they can begin a formal reading program at 6?

---Shouldn't you give every student who enters first grade a reading readiness test and plan his/her beginning reading program on the basis of the test results?

---Are reading readiness programs still necessary for most children? (They seem better prepared since Sesame Street and have more pre-school experience).

---How much have the TV shows "Sesame Street" and "Electric Company" helped children? Do children who have watched the TV programs read better than children who didn't watch them?

---Would it be better to begin kindergarteners with perceptual skills training before introducing phonics instruction? Wouldn't it help to use a program like Frostig first?

---Does Black dialect speech interfere with learning to read? What can the teacher do to decrease the interference?

---How useful are readers written in Black dialect for teaching dialect speakers to read?

---Is there any evidence to support the use of language experience without specific instruction in decoding skills? Have children learned to read successfully with such an approach?

---Should a first grade teacher spend most of her time with instruction in phonics? Does it help to combine phonics instruction with a language experience approach?

There were also more general questions that apply to the instruction in reading at the earliest stages and continue beyond, such as:

---It is possible for poor decoders to acquire meaning from what they read?

---What level of decoding skills is the minimum for students to progress easily with acquiring meaning from what they read?

---Have we determined that there are roughly between 200-300 separate reading skills that should be taught up to grade six?

---We are using a set of reading objectives for grades Kg.-6. Each objective on our syllabus represents one or more subskills of the reading process. Our curriculum department is redoing the sequence because teachers reported problems with pre-requisite skills which were unmet by earlier objectives on the sequence. We would appreciate more guidance on the process of sequencing the basic skills of reading.

---Are we hampering students' abilities to comprehend by stressing phonics instruction in first and second grades?

---Is it true that the most effective approach to teaching second language readers is to start the process in their native language?

---Isn't it true that the most effective approach to teaching second language learners to read English is to provide them with a teacher who speaks their native language and can provide a good balance between English and their native language?

---What criteria are recommended for selecting materials for reading instruction?

---Has anyone identified the set of reading materials or basal series that has a high or the highest sensitivity to racist and sexist content?

---What is the best way to judge a basal reader series?

There were other questions that have implications for reading readiness and the early stages of reading, but those cited above were the major ones resulting from the RDIS project survey. It is important to note that all of the practitioners who were interviewed were primarily concerned with processes involved in language and reading comprehension, even at the earliest stages of instruction and learning to read.

While we thought it was critical to ask practitioners what they would like to learn from reading research, we also thought it was important to talk with some individuals who have conducted reading research. We interviewed seven outstanding reading researchers. Following are the questions we asked those researchers.

Researcher Questions

1. Would you identify a number of key issues in reading research and practice that are of importance (e.g., decoding, language experiences, vocabulary building, comprehension, etc.)?
   a. Does your identification result from practitioner input or from your reading or analysis of the research?
   b. Can you give a general assessment of how schools are doing on each (i.e., a general report card)?
2. Is there <u>emerging</u> research with direct implications for practice?
   a. What is the research?
   b. What are the implications?
   c. What would help in the implementation of these findings?
3. In your own work, how did you:
   a. identify relevant literature?
   b. synthesize it? (Focus on process.)
   c. decide on a format for presentation?

4. What mechanism was used to distribute your work (e.g., book publishers, workshops, curriculum product)?
5. Have you received feedback on the work?
   a. Scholarly (e.g., reviews, letters from colleagues)?
   b. From users (includes sales of the book, data--even informal--on implementation, etc.)?
6. Are there issues you know of that are of concern to practitioners but without much research to help them?
7. Are there issues on which there is sufficient consensus to inform practice with specific guidelines? If so, what are those issues?
8. Are there issues that you would recommend that we not include in our coverage of research topics for practitioners? If so, what are they and will you explain your reservations about including them?

As one might expect, there were different emphases in the responses we received from the practitioners and researchers. However, we did find some convergence between the problems that were identified by practitioners and the issues that researchers identified as important for research study or where there is significant, emerging research activity. It is clear that the expectations from practitioners are greater than researchers' assessments of the potential for answering these questions. In fact, given the frequency with which the lag between research and practice was alluded to by the researchers, it seems important to emphasize to practitioners that research does not speak to all problems. The area of greatest convergence between practitioner and researcher responses was reading comprehension. While practitioners are asking practical questions about improving students'

comprehension abilities, researchers indicated that much of the research on the comprehension process is exploratory and only tentative findings are possible, especially as it applies to the implementation of specific classroom practices.

In the current effort of the RDIS project, the staff and consultant panel of reading researchers agree that only one-third of the questions we received could be answered on the basis of research evidence with any degree of confidence.

To summarize, after asking the question, "What do practitioners want to know," we gather, summarize and interpret information in an attempt to provide the best answers research can currently provide. In some instances, it has been necessary to restate questions in a more answerable form. The result is an interpretative report, one that is not simply a summary of research findings, but one that presents the questions in the situational context (information provided during the interview); is firmly grounded in the research literature; and interprets that literature so that a more focused and useful answer may be given to the practitioners' questions.